



REVIEW: EDITION

Serenatas for Dublin

**Johann Sigismund Kusser (1660–1727), ed. Samantha Owens
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Johann Sigismund Kusser got around. His peregrinations across Europe brought him into contact with a vibrant and ever-changing cast of sovereigns, musicians and librettists – yet none so mutable as Kusser himself. Though he was known to be a difficult character, somehow he managed to thrive, acquiring important positions wherever he ended up. Kusser's success, evidenced in part by the volume under review here, might just be attributed to his political flexibility. Put simply, Kusser knew how to cultivate power by composing on-trend music in line with the desires of the authorities. Whether that music stands the test of time remains to be seen.

This volume is the latest product of Samantha Owens's long-standing engagement with Kusser (or Cousser), thoroughly detailed in her monograph *The Well-Travelled Musician: John Sigismund Cousser and Musical Exchange in Baroque Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017). The three serenatas stem from Kusser's lengthy affiliation with the Dublin viceregal court, a relationship he cultivated from the time of his arrival in Ireland in July 1707. Controlled by the Protestant Ascendancy, the largely English and exclusively Protestant ruling class of Ireland, the court confirmed its authority by celebrating British interests. Typically, the serenatas immortalize the memory of William III (a still-controversial subject in Ireland), Queen Anne herself and the British triumph at Utrecht. While a firm date is lacking for the ode to William III (*No! He's Not Dead!*; more on this below), evidence uncovered by Owens reveals that *The Universal Applause of Mount Parnassus* dates from Anne's birthday celebrations in 1711, while *An Idylle on the Peace* was premiered at Dublin's Theatre Royal on 16 June 1713.

The serenatas are products of their time. Each exists in a single manuscript source: the odes for Anne and William are both autograph manuscripts (Bodleian Library (GB-Ob), Ms. Tenbury 765, and Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Musiksammlung (D-Hs), M A/836), while *An Idylle on the Peace* was copied by someone close to Kusser (D-Hs ND VI 2892). Owens's edition, based on these unique sources with additional textual confirmation from librettos printed in 1711 and 1713, helpfully provides three plates demonstrating the hands. All three works typify the mixed style practised by Kusser and many of his contemporaries: a 'French' overture opens the action, followed by Italianate recitative–aria pairs for solo singers interspersed with choruses, dances and the occasional duet, all accompanied by four-part orchestra. An edition of the texts updates the spelling and punctuation; however, some additional glosses on characters' names, events referred to and even vocabulary (including the luscious word 'truckle') would have been desirable. The poetry rarely rises above mediocre and sometimes descends to offensive, at least to modern sensibilities.

Like many composers of his day, Kusser and his unknown librettists liberally drew upon pre-existing work when constructing these serenatas. According to Owens, the text for *An Idylle on the Peace* is modelled on an English translation of the prologue to Lully's *Proserpine*. Further,

Kusser recycled five arias from his pastoral opera *Erindo* (Hamburg, 1694): four in *The Universal Applause of Mount Parnassus* and one in *No! He's Not Dead!* While a full score of *Erindo* is lacking, forty-four arias associated with the opera's premiere in Hamburg were published in 1695 as *Arien aus der Opera Erindo* (Hamburg: Niclas Spieringk, 1695; RISM A/I K 3076). Owens identifies the arias in question (xiv, note 44); however, the curious might be disappointed, as the numbers given for the arias are strangely incorrect. For the record: 'Amor hat in meine Brust' is Aria XXVI, 'Lieb und Treu wird nimmer fehlen' is Aria XVII, 'Betrachte doch die Qual' is Aria XXXIII, 'Bin ich dir zum Ziel erlesen' is Aria XXIII and 'Nie hat ohn' in diesem Herze' is Aria XXVIII. One might imagine that Kusser drew liberally on his other operatic compositions as well, although, unfortunately, the loss of much of his music makes such comparative work impossible.

The most substantial work is *The Universal Applause of Mount Parnassus*, occupying the first 125 pages of the edition. Apollo (scored for alto) appears with all the Muses (sopranos); nine sopranos are indeed necessary, as indicated by the scoring for No. 15, 'By reason Anna steereth'. Each phrase of the recitative is sung by a different character. Even more creative is the extensive 'Ground' ('No other than immortal lays', No. 2), in which all ten soloists have a turn at vocalizing over the much-loved descending tetrachord (here in G minor), interspersed with ensemble sections. The effect is hypnotic, an orgy of enthusiasm for Anne. This serenata also features the most creative orchestration, including a then-à la mode pair of voice flutes in the aria 'Laurels that adorn her' (No. 12). Recent performances by Peter Whelan and Ensemble Marsyas prove that this may be the most charming of the three serenatas; in any case it should be of interest to the many scholars (and general readers) now re-evaluating the reign of Anne.

An Idylle on the Peace joins the ever-growing legion of local musical celebrations for the Peace of Utrecht. Stage directions attest to the capabilities of Dublin's Theatre Royal, which possessed a raised stage with a trapdoor (*Discord sinks underground*) and a chariot which most likely did not fly (*Victory comes in a triumphant car*). Surely to the horror of the theatre's owners, Discord enters 'with lighted torches in her hand' (one might recall here the fatal heart attack of Gerhard Schott, Kusser's former boss, when fireworks were planned in his Gänsemarkt theatre in Hamburg in 1702). The serenata is scored for five-part chorus (SSATB) and six named roles (SSSATT); however, the fact that Kusser called it a *Serenata à 5* might indicate that the tenor soloist doubled the roles of Discord and Mercury.

Most unusual is the serenata for four voices (SSSB) on the subject of William III. It was simply not done to write odes to monarchs who had been dead for years – unless, of course, one inhabited a place like Dublin. William's conquest of Ireland confirmed the land as a dependency wholly under Protestant rule. Those Irish Catholic nobles who had temporarily been restored to their lands by Charles II after Cromwell's bloody purges were removed for good and William became the banner and symbol of the imported Protestant ruling class, as noted in Owens's excellent Introduction. The authorities in Dublin thus regularly celebrated William in song, a tradition to which this serenata surely belongs. It was probably composed to commemorate William's birthday, and Owens suggests that the serenata dates from 1710. However, a close reading of the text more strongly favours another date, as I will argue here.

The most cutting text issues from the mouth of 'Albania', whom Owens identifies as 'Scotland'. This is incorrect: Albania refers rather to the island of Great Britain, which in 1707 was finally consolidated by the Union of Parliaments – a major goal of Anne's government from the moment she acceded to the throne. That union becomes tangible, visible and audible in the character of Albania, who (painfully!) reminisces, 'Almost oppress'd with Romish superstition / my groans to Belgia's shores arrived / Great William heard, and hast'ning with healing in his wings my isle relieved' (No. 3). The customs and monetary union established by the Acts of Union provided economic benefits to Scotland which were greatly desired by the ruling elites in Ireland. And while the Parliament of Ireland congratulated Anne in July of 1707 (as Cousser arrived in Dublin), Ireland's exclusion from the Union until 1801 proved a source of long-standing dissension.

Further evidence argues more strongly for a date of November 1708, when Britain had experienced a domestic triumph: the suppression of a French-supported Jacobite rising in Scotland. Albania's text in No. 8 of the serenata alludes to the Jacobite Assassination Plot of 1696, the aftermath of which led to the consolidation of the Williamite Revolution and lasting suppression of Jacobites. As Albania declares, William 'drove the Romish fry away'. The next serious Jacobite attempt followed in the spring of 1708, when France supported a plot to invade Scotland and thereby distract Britain from the stalled War of the Spanish Succession. The scheme proved an utter failure, with the French navy driven away by the British. In the serenata, Fame extols British naval victories over France (No. 6), while the chorus asserts that 'None his point could better gain, / better counterplot his foe' (No. 10). Taken as a whole, the text of *No! He's Not Dead!* rehearses all the Williamist arguments for the benefits of the Glorious Revolution, and hence the glory of Anne's reign: a resurgent Protestant Church, freedom from France and economic renewal based on the development of manufacturing and colonial exploitation.

No! He's Not Dead! (along with the *Idylle*) was recorded in 2010 by the ensemble Aura Musicale under the direction of Balázs Máté (Kusser, *Two Serenatas for the Dublin Court*, Hungaroton Classic, HCD 32633). I do not expect to hear it live any time soon, for the texts are – to put it mildly – of their time. To put it more directly, all three of these serenatas may best be seen as products of the colonialist court occupying Dublin at the time, as spectacular expressions of the Stuart expansionist policies that made Britain 'Great'. As such, they may inspire further postcolonial studies of their contents and contexts. For, if nothing else, these serenatas give us yet more insight into the murky beginnings of the eighteenth century and its fantastic political mess, one whose stains are still visible today.

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